

The Naked Wedding

by Jerry Ratch

New Year's day was my brother's third wedding, and people gathered in the Memorial Garden, up the path above the main part of the camp. My mother, Terri, Quebec, and Quebec's daughter, Judy — who was Catholic and just visiting, and who wouldn't go out of the trailer because of all the naked people around — had spent the entire New Year's Eve sewing these special break-away maroon pants for the men of the wedding party. When the time came at the reception following the wedding, the men were all supposed to stand in a line, pull these rip cords, and their pants would just drop away. People at these nudist camps went in for costumes in a big way, for some reason. Halloween was something else again. Bare-breasted women wearing masks like in Venice, and so on.

The Preacher was a bony man in his late fifties, wearing a pith helmet to shield himself from the sun. He had on sandals, of course, like most of the people around there, but basically nothing else — except for a collar and a white dickey around his neck to signify he was the man officiating at the wedding ceremony.

He hurried everyone through the preliminaries, such as who should be standing where, who had the ring. I showed him the ring when asked, pulling it from under the satin sash around my waist. None of the men wore shirts. But along with these weird maroon pants, each had on a top coat. Mine was dark gray, my brother's was white. We'd each put on a bow tie for good measure. It almost looked normal in the pictures that followed, except for the fact that our chests were bare.

The rows of wooden benches began filling up with totally naked people. Most carried a towel, so they didn't have to sit bare-assed on the wooden benches. Quite a crowd came up the little path to the Memorial Garden. Nearly the whole camp came out to see this wedding. Harris and Quebec were very popular there. Or else there

wasn't that much else doing around the camp. You know, watching nudes at the pool, or playing tennis, it all grew to be pretty standard. So when a nudist wedding came up, and you had a chance to see someone in a costume — well, what the heck! Grab a beer and y'all come, as they say.

When everyone was assembled, the wedding began. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The weather was clear, it was 85°. Back in Chicago, I saw on the news that it was below zero.

"Good friends," started the Preacher, "God loves the body. The very notion God could hate anything that holds as much charisma as the human form, is ludicrous. Wasn't it after all on the sixth day of creation, yes, good friends, the sixth day, that the body was shaped out of clay and air and light? After all else was made, and before God Himself rested, notably He fashioned the body.

"And you know what? I think it must have been because God was at heart lonely, therefore making us in His own image. That above all else, should be reason enough to love our own bodies ourselves, as God surely meant for us to love and to celebrate. He breathed on our souls as if on a mirror. Can any of us say it was not to envision Himself, and embody heaven right here on earth?"

The minister adjusted the pith helmet on his head.

"Jesus, it shore is warm out to be wearing this getup!" the Reverend remarked. The wedding party let out with a laugh, and that seemed to bolster the man.

"So, let us now begin. As I said, good friends — God loves the body. And that is why we are gathered here today in this veritable Eden of God's delight, to celebrate the union of two lovely children of nature, who stand here naked before us, before God and the world, so that all may witness — that there's no more between them than what God created in the beginning.

"So may they always gaze on each other with the same love given them by God, and in the same way. And let us say, Amen!"

"Amen!" the wedding party repeated.

The white dickey around the minister's neck stood out in stark contrast to the suntanned flesh of his arms and shoulders,

dotted with large freckles, which left his skin seemingly spattered and stained by rust. It was rumored that he'd been defrocked once from a previous congregation. This had led the preacher to practicing at various trailer camps situated in and around these parts, at the outskirts really of all towns. People at the parks often enough found themselves in need of the services of a preacher for weddings and for funerals, and this preacher, Reverend C. James Cannon, Esq. was known to be willing to come out at a very reasonable rate.

"Now, usually," he continued, "when I say in a ceremony that these are children standing naked before God and the world, everyone would understand me to be speaking metaphorically. But as you can see with your own eyes, there's no need for metaphors here in this Garden of Eden, where we come together to celebrate this day." The entire assembly at the camp let out with a harrumphing cheer, the preacher acknowledging them with a broad, theatrical sweep of the hand.

"And that is what makes this union," he went on, "of Harris and Quebec, so very special — because of it's being so literal — might I say, even biblical, in this case. We see no fig leaves here, because they have nothing to hide from God whatsoever.

"Harris, Quebec, turn and face the world — so that all may behold you."

The bride stripped bare, but for the veil trailing down her back, faced the rows of people on the benches. Her breasts literally cast shadows, they were so large.

"Now," the preacher continued, "as you can see, Harris here is actually wearing something today. An exquisite white coat and tails and a white bow tie, as is only appropriate for a man on big moments in his life such as this. In point of fact, if this were any wedding party anywhere else, you'd be witnessing nothing unusual in the least — except for the fact that none of the men here are wearing shirts. Why, excuse me! I thought I was hired to do a wedding at a nudist camp — and here we have men in the wedding party who are *practically dressed!*" The crowd of nudists roared.

"But hold on a minute, folks," the man continued, "because do we ever have a surprise in store for us — as you will see at the reception.

"Harris, please take a bow," said the preacher. "Thank you. Now, you will notice that Harris has on a pair of maroon trousers today, the same as his brother here, who's down from San Francisco to be the best man. And some of you may be wondering about these suspicious-looking trousers. More, as I said, on that subject in a moment.

"Now, I just wanted to add this — I am told that today is a very special day for Harris, because this is his third wedding. And it's been a long time coming, hasn't it, folks? So Harris — I bless you that your life with Quebec may be the most pleasing and permanent relationship you've ever known.

"And now let's take a good look at these two children before God." The preacher paused dramatically, gazing at the middle-aged couple before continuing. "Aren't they gorgeous? Obviously a couple who know what they are doing. And a couple who love one another deeply — to be taking this step at this time in their lives."

Someone from the back of the assembly cheered, "Here, here!"

"Now, about these maroon trousers that the men of the wedding party have on," continued the preacher. "What a very special pair of trousers they are, as you shall see later at the reception as promised. These pants were tailored especially for this occasion by Harris' mother, Bess. I just met Bess today," he said gesturing. "She's this wonderful, beaming lady with her hair all dolled up in a brand new perm. Stand up, Bess, so that God and the world can see the proud mother of the groom."

There was a round of applause as my mother stood up from the bench in front. Someone had put together a garland of red roses for her head, which rode on top of her stark white perm like a crown. She was wearing a sheer top to protect her skin from the sun.

Someone from the rear of the crowd shouted, "All right, Bess!"

She sat back down on the white towel she'd brought along to cover the bench. Her head continued in its constant shaking back and forth. This was really starting to worry me.

"Bess," asked the Reverend, "do you have any words for your son on this special day?"

My mother seemed confused. "What?" she asked Terri, who was sitting on the other side of her.

Terri repeated loudly, "They want to know if you have anything to say, before Dad gets married."

"Oh," said my mother. She tried to rise again from the bench. Terri and Gina steadied her arms so she could stand up more easily.

"Son," she said, "it's about time you made it legal with Quebec, isn't it? I just hope you settle down now. And . . . well . . . may this year bring you peace. That's about all I can think."

Then my mother turned, looking around at the assembly of people. "He's such a good boy," she said. "They both are, both my sons. They've worked so hard. I'm proud of them both." With that, she sat back down.

Next it was my turn, and I stepped forward. "I have something to add."

The preacher raised his hand, acknowledging me.

"Harris, my brother," I said, "I'm glad we've put the past behind us today, and that we've become reunited as a family again. I don't know what took you so long, but I'm glad you finally made it to this point. So, I just wanted to add this: To Harris and to Quebec — May the third time be the charm!"

Immediate shouts and applause broke out from the crowd.

Then Reverend Cannon got right to it, performing the ceremony quickly. Terri stood up at the end, showering the bride and groom with white petals from a paper bucket.

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The reception was being held under a white tent, which was set up beside the pool. I have a picture in my memory of my brother playing his saxophone with the band under some palm trees next to the pool. He was wearing nothing but shades, the sax hanging at his side as he leaned forward with his pendulous belly hanging out. Except for that belly, he looked pretty hip, pretty cool.

At one point, I asked him why he'd waited so long to get divorced from Francine. She wanted to keep putting things off, Harris responded. Mostly, it had to do with the impending bankruptcy.

"Isn't that process over with already?" I asked.

"All right —" he burst out all of a sudden, "— it's time for the men of the wedding party to line up. Get into a straight line!" he ordered.

I followed directions like everyone else.

"Okay, Gentlemen," Harris said, "— start your engines."

That was supposed to be the signal. Everyone who was wearing the maroon trousers, pulled at a rip cord hanging at the side, and down went our pants. The crowd roared their approval. Then the dancing began.

After some time, Gina and I cornered Quebec and asked her what was going on with the bankruptcy, since Harris didn't want to talk about it.

"I'm a little worried about this thing, Robbie," she said.

"Why?"

"Because all of a sudden Francine and Miller went into hiding, and can't be found. They've got the corporate papers with them. You know how she was always doing the books."

I nodded. How well I knew Francine. She had always been the one cutting the paychecks. That was how she held on to her power. She'd been the one who gave the order that I was no longer on the payroll, when I was down in L.A. working for my brother. I still hated the very thought of her, because of the way she did that. I felt she'd come between us as brothers, and that we'd never really

been able to completely heal the rift since then. It was definitely Francine and Francine alone, I learned from bitter experience — who actually held the purse strings of the company. It had really been her pulling the strings in the background the whole time.

"Well," said Quebec, "see, we took on this investor by the name of John Lytle. He put \$100,000 into the company — it was all of his retirement money, apparently — but then all of a sudden most of the money was used up. It vanished just like that. Then because he and his wife were on the board of directors, the next thing we knew — they voted Harris right out. Francine and Miller even went against Harris. It was awful.

"But that's not what's bothering me so much," she added.

"What?" I asked. She was giving me the willies, since she was speaking so low and quiet, to make sure Harris didn't hear us talking.

"It's this thing about Francine and Miller suddenly disappearing with the books."

"Yeah," I said, "that's strange."

"No, that's not it."

"What, then?"

"Well, it's this John Lytle guy. He called up out of the blue and offered to hire Harris on a consulting fee basis. That is real strange. Because John Lytle was completely outraged and angry at Harris. He even threatened him."

"Really?"

"He's Lebanese, Robbie. He frightens me a little. They do things differently. He has a real temper when he doesn't get his way. Then there's this stuff with Francine and Miller disappearing with the corporate books, and . . .

"You know, all these lawsuits now are getting filed directly against John Lytle personally — because they can't complete the corporate bankruptcy without the corporate books. It's a real mess. And then John Lytle suddenly calls up Harris — and offers him this money? I don't know, it kind of scares me. It doesn't make sense that he would do that all of a sudden. I mean, this man was flat out

threatening Harris before they boosted him off the board. Do you think you could say something to Harris? He's your brother, Robbie."

"Oh, right, Harris! Like he's going to listen to his goofy little brother. I don't know, Becky."

"Will you give it a try at least, Rob? Try something with him, won't you? You're his brother. He loves you. He won't listen to me, you know how he is. I'm real worried."

"When's he supposed to meet with this John Lytle guy?" I asked.

"They have a meeting at Denny's Coffee Shop in Corona, on Highway 91 at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. I'm driving him there to drop him off. They're going on appointments from there. The crazy thing is — John Lytle offered him one thousand dollars, cash. There's something real spooky going on. Harris said the money's too good to pass up. And do we ever need it! There's no question of that. But he just received a great offer to run a chain of liquor stores in Tallahassee, so pretty soon we won't really be needing that money so badly anymore.

"It's been eating away at him, that we've been so broke. It's been killing him inside, Robbie. It's pitiful to see him wolfing down all these stomach pills he's been taking, and blood pressure medicine. We've barely had enough to buy the medicine lately. And you know how he is — he's too damned proud to go on General Assistance.

"So, would you see if you could have a talk with him, Rob? I don't want him going to that meeting with John Lytle tomorrow morning. I'm afraid of that man."

"Did you say anything to Harris about it?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He blew up at me," she said. "You know how he can get. He can be so bull-headed. This is our wedding, Rob. I can't keep nagging him on our wedding day. I just want him to be at peace today."

"But it's okay if I nag him?"

Quebec hung her head. "Will you . . . at least try?" she whined.

I did try, the whole night of the wedding. But Harris wouldn't let us get near him. I think Harris knew what was coming, and he kept avoiding us all night. That's probably why he got up on the platform with the dance band. He stayed up there with the band all evening and late into the night, blowing on his saxophone, wearing those dark shades like a cool, hip, be-bop character out of a Jack Kerouac novel. Which he was not.

Then it was time for the bride and groom to go back to their trailer and be alone. And that was that.

Neither Gina nor myself could get any sleep. I kept tossing and turning, and waking her up. At one point we both got up and went outside. We walked up the road together. That was when I looked up. The sky was clear, moonless, and filled to the brim with what a poet once described as a deep throw of stars. It was overwhelming. We didn't get this kind of clarity up in Berkeley, or around big cities like Chicago. You had to get way out away from the city lights to see this sort of thing. It seemed like there was a dense band, where the Milky Way touched the earth at both ends of the sky. So dense that it felt like you could stick your hand right up into it like a pudding.

Suddenly I heard what sounded like a hoarse rooster crowing, or a dog howling. It was really a combination of both. It was definitely the sound of some wild animal I'd never heard before, and we quickly ran back to the trailer and locked the door.

The sky was beginning to get gray when I got up. We both got dressed and went over to my mother's trailer. I knew she'd be up, that she'd have things cooking, and that was exactly what she was doing.

"C'mon, c'mon," she said, "have some breakfast. C'mon in and sit down. Here's Gina too, come on in here you two."

"I kept waking her up all night," I joked.

"Oh, you men!" said Bess. "Are you happy, son? She's such a nice girl. Are you happy with her?" She was scrambling eggs in a

frying pan. Her head was shaking. There was the sweet smell of bacon in the air.

The door opened, and there stood my brother. "Mom, I have the best news!" Harris beamed. He grinned his big successful grin. It was the same look as always, as if he'd just cut a deal. It was that special look only a salesman could get when he's made a sale.

"Have you eaten anything, Harris?" our mother asked. "C'mon, let me make you some breakfast."

"I saw your lights, Mom. I knew you'd be up. Listen — I got this great new job offer to run a chain of liquor stores. But the bad news is, it's all the way across the country in Tallahassee, Florida. I have to leave next week."

My mother took his hand, pulling him in the trailer door, and sitting all of us down at her tiny pull-out table. "I'm mixing up a nice plateful of scrambled eggs and bacon. Do you want some toast? How about grapefruit? Should I put on a pot of coffee for you?"

"Mom, listen to me. I have to go to Florida next week. I'm telling you now. Okay?"

Her head was shaking. She'd already broken open six eggs in the skillet on the stove. They sizzled in the bacon grease.

"Do you have your hearing aid turned on, Mom? Mom!"

"What?" she said, looking up from the stove. "You don't have to yell at me, Harris. I can hear, for goodness sakes."

"Mom, look at me. I'm going for a new job down in Florida. It starts next week already. It's a great offer. The man is letting me run a whole chain of liquor stores. There's fifty stores, and he's cutting me in on the profits too. It's going to be great, Mom. As soon as things get going down there, I'll be sending you some of the money I owe. Okay? It won't be long. You'll see. Oh, Mom, I'm so happy. It's going to be great, you'll see."

"Is Becky going too?" she asked.

"Not right away," he said. "There's nowhere for her to stay there yet, until I start pulling in the big money. She'll be staying here at the camp with you. Okay?"

My mother didn't reply. She kept scrambling the eggs.

"Is that okay? Mom, don't be that way with her, okay? She's my wife now, for God's sake. And you've got your own space with this trailer, so you two won't ever get on each others' nerves again, like before. She's my legal wife now. Things are different, Mom."

"I know, I know," my mother said, looking at him, then at all of us sitting there together at her little trailer table. "I'm so glad you're not with that — *Francine!* — anymore. She was just awful, *that hussy!* I don't know why you didn't divorce her long ago, and marry Becky. But, that's how it goes, I guess. Things sure are different from your dad and me."

My mother brought the skillet over to the little table, scraping the bacon and scrambled eggs onto the plates in front of us.

"Fifty years we were married," she sighed. "My Otto! Your dad, *he was such a good man!*"

"Mom . . . c'mon now," Harris said, getting up and putting his arms around her. He held her white permed head against his chest. "It's going to be all right now. You'll see. I'm so happy. Everything's going to work out all right again. Once I'm settled in, I'll give you a call, and you can come there for a visit. You'll see."

My mother looked up into his face. She told Harris, "Maybe Becky will be the right one for you, son. I don't know why you had to end up with *that Francine*. But, son, maybe Becky is going to bring you some luck. You sure deserve it. You've worked so hard. Just like your Dad." She ran her fingers through the tinted hair at the side of my brother's head.

"Oh, Harris, Robbie . . . your father was such a good man. I miss him so!"

"I know, Mom." Harris held onto her. Both Gina and I jumped up from the table and held on to them too, and my brother let us. We seemed to be like that forever. "I know," said Harris.

"So, then," I said, "this means you don't have to go to this meeting with this ex-business partner of yours today, John Lytle?"

Harris pulled back, glaring. He said, "So, that's why you're up so damned early."

"That's why I'm here, yes."

"I can just imagine who put you up to this. Listen," he said, poking a finger in my chest, "I need that money, I'm going to the meeting this morning. Period."

My mother held on and hugged all of us hard, squeezing us into a huddle.

"My two boys!" she said. "Oh, Gina, I don't know what's got into them. Don't you two start arguing." Her head was wobbling the way it always did now. "Let's have some breakfast. Shame on you, arguing at an hour like this. C'mon now, sit down and eat. Sit. C'mon, you two. Eat. My two boys. Honestly!"

